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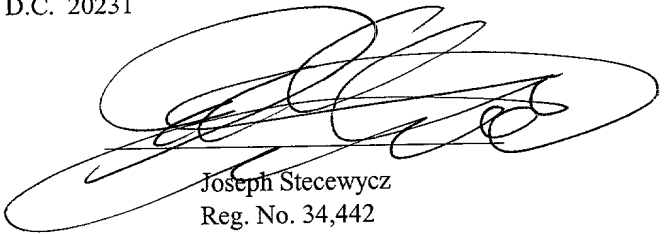
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IN THE UNITED STATES PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE

APPLICATION for PATENT

OF

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FOR

APPARATUS AND METHOD FOR PROTECTION OF AN ELECTRONIC CIRCUIT

TITLE: APPARATUS AND METHOD FOR PROTECTION OF AN ELECTRONIC CIRCUIT

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION

[00001] The present Application is related to Provisional Patent Application entitled "Memory module protection circuit" filed 16 November 2000 and assigned serial number 60/249,220.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of Invention

[00002] The present invention relates to the protection of electronic circuitry and, in particular, to the protection of a memory circuit from the effects of a power supply anomaly.

Description of the Background Art

[00003] As understood by one skilled in the relevant art, when the supply of electrical power to most conventional microprocessors or electronic circuits is interrupted or falls outside a specified voltage range, there results a non-conforming or an undesirable output from the affected microprocessor or electronic circuit. For example, if a voltage drop or other power anomaly occurs as data is being written to a memory device in a computer system, a portion of the data in the process of being written may be corrupted or lost.

[00004] In some cases, power failure may not only interrupt a regular flow of operation, but may cause additional problems such as by writing corrupted data. Under certain situations an electronic system can withstand the effects of a power failure, but the system may otherwise malfunction as a result of data corruption. The data may not be written or, worse yet, may be written incorrectly.

[00005] What is needed is a protective system and method which will allow an electronic circuit or module to complete internal operation before the effects of a power failure are realized

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[00006] The disclosed device and method serve to insure the continued, proper operation of a protected microprocessor-controlled electronic circuit, subsequent to the onset of an unexpected power source anomaly.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[00007] Fig 1 is a functional block diagram of a conventional electronic system including a power supply, a master control system, and an electronic module with a memory;

[00008] Fig 2 is a functional block diagram of a memory module including a differential comparator, a power port for receiving electrical power, and a data/control port for receiving data and control signals;

[00009] Fig 3 is a preferred embodiment of the differential comparator of Fig. 2; and

[00010] Fig 4 is a graph illustrating a first waveform representing a reference voltage and a second waveform representing a received power voltage input to the differential comparator of Fig. 2.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[00011] There is shown in Fig. 1 a simplified block diagram of an electronic system 10 in which the present invention may be advantageously used. The electronic system 10 includes a power supply 11 providing electrical power to an electronic module

13 and to a master system 15. The master system 15 provides control signals 16 and exchanges data 18 with the electronic module 13. As long as the power supply 11 continues to provide uninterrupted voltage within a specified range, the electronic module 13 functions normally, to store data in a memory 21, or to provide valid output signals 19 to a printer, for example. However, when the voltage from the power supply 11 falls outside the specified range, a power failure occurs, as represented by a falling step waveform 12. When the power failure occurs, normal operation of the electronic module 13 and/or the output signal 19 may be affected.

[00012] The master system 15 typically includes a reset circuit 17 which senses the output of the power supply 11 in order to detect abnormal voltage levels or changes. When an abnormality occurs, the reset circuit 17 generates an external reset signal 14 to terminate, or invalidate, actions subsequent to the occurrence of the erroneous control signals. The external reset signal 14 may also interrupt or terminate the internal operations initiated by the electronic module 13.

[00013] Problems arise when operations internal to the electronic module 13 are interrupted during a power failure, with the operations left in indeterminate states. Moreover, when power failure occurs, the control signals 16 generated by the master system 15 may inadvertently change states (i.e., between high and low values) producing erroneous control signals and generating false actions.

[00014] In accordance with the present invention, the above-described problems are mitigated by means of protection circuitry provided in the electronic module 13 as described in greater detail below. The protection circuitry preferably includes a reserve source of energy to provide additional electrical power by which the internal operations already initiated by the electronic module 13 may be completed correctly. Additionally,

the external reset signal 14 and critical control signals 16 are conditioned so as to mitigate or eliminate the occurrence of false actions.

[00015] There is shown in Fig. 2 a simplified functional block diagram of a preferred embodiment of a memory module 120 in accordance with the present invention. The memory module 120 includes a power port 123, for receiving electrical power (V_{CC}), such as provided by the power supply 11 of Fig. 1, and a data/control port 125, for receiving data and control signals, such as the reset signal 14, the control signals 16, and the data 18. In the configuration shown, the memory module 120 functions to provide protection against power source anomalies to a processor 129 and a memory 121, such as a flash memory.

[00016] Power received at the power port 123 is provided to a reserve power source 131. The reserve power source 131 performs two functions. First, the reserve power source 131 provides power to other components of the memory module 120 as a module voltage (V_M). Secondly, the reserve power source 131 insures that the module voltage V_M is maintained for a predetermined amount of time (denoted as Δt) after an anomaly or a failure has occurred in the received power voltage V_{CC} . To maintain the module voltage V_M in this way, the reserve power source 131 includes a reserve supply of electrical energy and further includes an electrical switch to prevent discharging when V_{CC} goes low. This reserve supply may comprise, for example, a battery, a capacitance, or an inductance, and the switch may comprise a diode or a transistor.

[00001] The data 18 and the control signals 16 received by the memory module 120 at the data/control port 125 are transmitted through a module control signal conditioner circuit 127. The module control signal conditioner circuit 127 maintains critical signals (e.g., data 18 and control 16) during power failure so as to eliminate false operation. Upon detection of a power failure condition, the module control signal

conditioner circuit 127 will force, or hold, the critical signals in inactive states. This action provides for the completion, without interruption, of operations already initiated by the memory module 120, including the operation of the external reset signal 14. In a preferred embodiment, the memory 121 comprises a solid-state device resident on the same card as the processor 129. Alternatively, the memory 121 may comprise a removable storage medium such as a magnetic or optical disk.

[00017] Upon the occurrence of an anomaly or failure in the received power voltage V_{CC} , the module control signal conditioner circuit 127, which is controlled by a differential comparator 133 via a control line 149, reacts to set and hold all critical control signals, including the external reset signal 14, in inactive states. This action is taken to prevent the transmission of any erroneous signals resulting from a change in logic states in response to the drop in power voltage V_{CC} .

[00018] Anomalies in the received power are detected by the differential comparator 133. The differential comparator 133 compares the voltage of the electrical power V_{CC} received at a comparator port 133b with a reference voltage (V_{REF}) received at a comparator port 133a. The reference voltage V_{REF} is obtained from the module power voltage V_M . The module power voltage V_M is filtered via a module power conditioner circuit 135, and the received electrical power V_{CC} is filtered via a power conditioner circuit 137 to produce a filtered power signal V'_{CC} . This filtering serves to further eliminate any false power failure detection.

[00019] Fig. 3 shows the differential comparator 133 in communication with a microprocessor 151, wherein the differential comparator 133 operates to provide a control signal to the microprocessor via the control line 149. The reset signal 14 is also provided to the microprocessor 151. The differential comparator 133 includes a comparator 143 which receives two voltage signals as shown. The electrical power V_{CC} signal is applied

to the anode of a diode 141, such as a Schottky diode, and to a first comparator port 143a via a resistor 147. A second voltage signal is applied to a second comparator port 143b. It can be appreciated by one skilled in the relevant art that a capacitance 145 serves to maintain the amplitude of the second signal presented to the second comparator port 143b for a predetermined time after the first voltage signal has begun to decrease following a power anomaly.

[00020] Operation of the memory module 120 can be explained with additional reference to Fig. 4 in which is shown waveforms 41 and 51. The waveform 41 represents the reference voltage V_{REF} input to the first comparator port 133a. The waveform 51 represents the received power voltage V_{CC} input to the second comparator port 133b.

[00021] In the example provided, the waveform 51 shows a minor voltage fluctuation 51a occurring between a time t_a and a time t_c . There may result a corresponding voltage fluctuation 41b occurring in the waveform 41 at a time t_b . The fluctuations 51a and 41b are of sufficiently small magnitudes and durations that operation of the memory module 120 is not affected. In a preferred embodiment, the differential comparator 133 is designed to exhibit hysteresis during operation. This hysteresis feature serves to make the differential comparator 133 less sensitive to such minor voltage fluctuations which may occur during normal operation of the memory module 120.

[00022] In contrast, the operation of the memory module 120 is affected when interruptions to the received electrical power voltage V_{CC} and to the reference voltage V_{REF} occur, such as at a time t_d . In the example provided, the received electrical power V_{CC} voltage drop following reference point 51d is sufficiently large to drop below the level of the reference voltage V_{REF} , at time t_e . At a later time t_f , the reference voltage V_{REF} has decreased to a value denoted by V_{RESET} , the voltage level at which an internal reset signal is generated by the module control signal conditioner circuit 127, which

terminates any internal operations of the memory module 120 subsequent to the time t_f . It should be understood that, at time t_f , all internal operations have been completed and that the module voltage V_M is still at the proper value. The time interval ($t_f - t_e$) is denoted as Δt , or 'backup time.'

[00023] When the received electrical power voltage V_{CC} falls below the reference voltage V_{REF} subsequent to time t_e , the differential comparator 133 will interpret this situation as a power failure event. In response to such a power failure event, the differential comparator 133 will force a backup operation and will trigger a protected mode operation. As can be appreciated by one skilled in the relevant art, the module voltage V_M may correspondingly fall below the predetermined voltage threshold (i.e., V_{RESET}). This drop in the module voltage V_M will cause undefined behavior in the memory module 120. Thus, the internal reset signal is provided to block any module activity subsequent to this condition, which occurs at time t_f .

[00024] In summary, the occurrence of the minor fluctuation 51a will not result in disruption, and the memory module 120 will continue to function normally. However, when the difference between the reference voltage V_{REF} and the received electrical power voltage V_{CC} becomes sufficiently small, as shown at time t_e , continued operation of the memory module 120 beyond the time t_e may result in, for example, corrupted data being written to the memory 131.

[00025] To prevent the writing of corrupted data, or other operational problems, the module control circuit 127 reacts to the detected power failure event at time t_e holding the external reset signal 14 and the critical control signals in inactive states. Otherwise, issuance of the external reset signal 14, for example, while certain operations have not been completed could result in the undesirable operational problems. The external reset signal 14 is held in an inactive state for at least the backup time interval of Δt .

[00026] As explained above, the reserve power source 131 is configured to maintain the module voltage V_M essentially constant, that is, within allowed limits, during the backup time interval Δt . The backup time interval Δt is specified as the period of time required to complete a particular, critical module operation. For example, in the memory module 120, the time interval Δt may be specified as the time required to complete a cycle of data transfer, as in a write-to-flash operation, typically 5 to 500 μsec .

[00027] While the invention has been described with reference to particular embodiments, it will be understood that the present invention is by no means limited to the particular constructions and methods herein disclosed and/or shown in the drawings, but also comprises any modifications or equivalents within the scope of the claims.

[00028] What is claimed is: